

The Efficiency of a Coaching Program in Changing the Leadership Style of the Middle and Top Managers from the Retail Domain

Alexandru Mihalcea

Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania

Diana Mihalcea

Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The present research aims to test the effects that our coaching program had on the leadership style adopted by a group of middle and top managers with at least 5 years of experience in the department or team they were leading.

The initial phase of the study involved 144 participants aged between 24 and 51 years old ($M_{age} = 34$ years) who completed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (e.g., Bass, 1999). As a following step, a number of 45 managers have been randomly selected in order to be included in the coaching program but 4 of them gave up before the end of the training period.

The statistical analyses that included 83% of the remained managers, have confirmed a significant improvement of the leadership abilities after the coaching sessions. Thus, following the coaching sessions, managers have obtained higher values for the transformational and transactional leadership and perceived themselves as being more thorough, more influential towards people around, more able to help their subordinates develop, as well as having enough power to stimulate teamwork and boost trust among their coworkers.

Keywords: *leadership style; transformational leadership; transactional leadership; coaching*

Corresponding author: Alexandru Mihalcea

Phone number: -

Email address: mihalcea.alexandru@yahoo.com

I. INTRODUCTION

The present research was elaborated in a time of economic crises during which the companies (from the retail domain) that we studied were forced on one hand, to reduce the employee costs most of the times by cutting the number of work positions and, on the other hand, to increase the efficiency of the remaining personnel.

The present economic climate, characterized by strong competition and increased dynamism represents a real challenge for the managers who seek for performance in the departments they are in charge of, while also being interested in their employees' well-being.

Within such context, the personnel quality, especially in the top management positions, is a main condition of building motivated work teams satisfied from a professional point of view and able to highly perform in order to lead the organization towards success.

On a professional level, when we refer to managerial efficiency, we conjure especially the leaders' ability to majorly impact their subordinates, to make transparent decisions and to involve their subordinates in this process of decision making (Avolio & Bass, 2004) and one of the most successful approaches that might be applied in order to gain efficiency in the field of management seems to be the implementation of a series of coaching sessions (Zeus & Skiffington, 2008).

Considering these aspects, the present research proposes to validate a coaching program developed by us and consisted of a standardized reduced intervention schema obtained as a result of applying different types of coaching sessions in different organizations. Thus, we finally opted for a coaching program comprised of 10 sessions that could be conducted over a period of five to six months. Our research objective was to emphasize the effects of this coaching program on the leadership style adopted by a sample of middle and top managers from the retail domain, by measuring their leadership efficiency before and after their participation to the 10 coaching sessions, and comparing their two performances.

We expected the managing coaching sessions to produce visible changes on the managers' behaviors with respect to their subordinates, and on their ways of communication and involvement in the act of decision making. We assume that such visible changes reflected by the statistically significant results and high enough effect sizes, could be considered a relevant support for the efficiency of our intervention and, by extension, for the success of the following similar interventions.

II. METHOD

1. Participants

In order to reach the objective of our study, respectively validating the managing coaching model, 144 middle and top managers have been selected (50% being males and 50% females). The participants are aged between 24 and 51 years old, with a mean of 34 years old. All selected managers have at least 5 years of experience in the department or team they have been leading and have not participated in the past two years to internal or external training leadership programs, namely training, coaching or mentoring sessions organized in a formal context.

The first step consisted in investigating the leadership style adopted by the participants, using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. As a following step, a number of 45 managers have been randomly selected in order to be included in the coaching program composed of 10 sessions centered on developing the leadership abilities. Until the end of the training program, approximately 9% (4 managers) of the participants have given up the coaching program. Thus, out of the 45 managers involved in the coaching program, two have ended the labor contract after six sessions, and other two have been placed in a new team and even though they have continued the training program, their results have not been included in the following statistical analysis.

At the ending of the coaching program the leadership style was re-evaluated. We mention that the data presented in this paper have been extracted from a wide study conducted between February 2012 and April 2013.

2. Measures

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) is an instrument that measures the leadership style and the managerial efficiency of the persons who work as a team or department coordinators, applying a whole range of leadership behaviors, ranging from the ones centered on spotting the workers' errors, to the ones that aim to motivate them and sustain their development as future leaders (Bass, 1999).

Thus, MLQ comprises 12 scales that are grouped into 5 categories as follows:

a. Transformational leadership scales:

- Idealized Attributes (leaders who influence and stimulate their teams' trust and implication in achieving the desired goals);
- Idealized Behaviors (leaders who instil a sense of morality, correctitude, conscientiousness and desire to follow common mission and objectives);

- Inspirational Motivation (leaders who stimulate their subordinates' positive attitude and team spirit);
- Intellectual Stimulation (leaders who develop workers' critical thinking, innovation and creativity);
- Individualized Consideration (leaders who pay attention to the need for achievement of the employees, and treat them accordingly, in an individualized manner).

b. Transactional Leadership:

- Contingent Reward (leaders who acknowledge their subordinates' worth and clarify their expectations);
- Management-by-Exception Active (leaders who monitor workers' errors and take corrective measures);

c. Passive/Avoidant behaviors:

- Management-by-Exception Passive (leaders who act only when the mistakes or the created problems become serious);
- Laissez-faire (leaders who avoid taking action or who delay making decisions).

d. Outcomes of Leadership:

- Extra Effort (employees' desire to succeed and their motivation to take efforts in this regard);
- Effectiveness (group efficiency and the degree to which the employees' and organization's needs are satisfied);
- Satisfaction (the team's satisfaction and contentment regarding leadership).

3. Procedure

The coaching model that we proposed in order to develop the leadership skills of the managers, was based on approximately 10 sessions conducted on an interval of two weeks apart.

In the following sections we shall present the coaching stages, including the preparing undertakings and the follow-up sessions. The developed coaching program has been divided on four stages and 10 coaching sessions and was based on a model of cognitive-behavioral coaching interventions.

During **the first phase**, a discussion with the company management took place, establishing a preliminary accord regarding the coaching intervention. The coaching objectives had been discussed along with the involved resources, the confidentiality commitment, the potential work methods and the costs. In the same context, the organizational needs and implicitly the ones of the involved managers have been analyzed.

During **the second phase** we have focused on data collection from different sources such as: top management interviews, applying the MLQ instrument in order to identify the leadership styles, focus groups involving the operational and managing personnel and also observation sessions regarding top managers' behavior at the workplace. Following this data analysis, the coaching contract has been finalized along with the objectives specific to the coaching process. Thus, based on the results and perceptions of the managing styles, one of the established objectives consisted of optimizing the transformational leadership abilities, namely motivating and developing leader's trust in his team, for the purpose of involving and enhancing its performance, the leader's attention given to the needs of employees and his ability to support them in their professional development, as well as his ability of being a personal example for the team in order for it to share common objectives and take efforts to accomplish them.

Considering the fact that the focus groups which the operational personnel participated to, revealed numerous situations in which the leading personnel was only centered on sharing negative feedback and low transparency in communicating the objectives and department results, we also took into consideration the development of the ability to provide situational and objective rewards which is a component of the transactional leadership style, a style characterized by the manager's focus on clarifying the requested tasks/objectives, communicating the performance criteria and showing acknowledgment for the employees' credits.

The following phase, namely the **third one** consisted in the actual coaching program. More precisely, ten coaching sessions have taken place on a total period of approximately six months. The sessions lasted 60 minutes and took place with a two-week frequency.

In order to establish the coaching program we followed the sequences described by Eaton & Johnson (2002) and Stern (2004), the process description presented by Thach (2002) (which uses the 360° type of evaluation during the coaching intervention), as well as the cognitive-behavioral coaching particularities traced by Palmer and Szymanska (2008). The elaborated coaching program was inspired by the cognitive-behavioral paradigm, being based on the hypothesis of cognitive stimulation and increase of the participants' awareness in order to identify and modify the distorted thinking patterns which cause stress and interfere with performance.

We offer a short description of the coaching program conducted during the third phase of our study, as follows:

- The first session: discussing information obtained during the data gathering phase (mostly the results of the personality questionnaires) as well as the managerial abilities, followed by the evaluation of the managerial abilities by multiple sources. The manager had a preliminary action plan prepared for the coaching process, given as homework.

- The second session: discussing the preliminary action plan according to the needs identified in the first session. Leadership behavior of the participants observed until that given moment have been discussed along with their consequences on the professional level, giving concrete examples and analyzing them on multiple axes (team, clients, superiors, performance objectives).
- The third session: finalizing the action plan by discussing the specific actions which are to be taken and identifying the problematic or obstacles which might interfere. In this session a coaching accord is established and a commitment regarding the involvement in the process and the achievement of the assumed objectives by the end of the coaching program is obtained from the manager. Realistic, measurable and precise goals are established (SMART objectives) in order to heighten the chances of reaching the desired purposes during the coaching sessions (the process of translating transformational abilities into measurable behavior).
- Sessions four, five and six are centered on each previously mentioned working axes. An example of a specific objective would be attaining a better understanding of the team's needs through active listening and attention given to the members during the work sessions and individual discussions. Moreover, during these sessions the actual experiences (e.g. the manner in which the sessions are being conducted) and the ideal situation to be reached by the end of the coaching sessions, are analyzed. It is also intended to look for new action alternatives, new perspectives by overcoming negative dysfunctional thinking patterns and negative attitudes that lead to a less efficient behavior, as well as to discover performing alternatives for the given contexts.

Between the coaching sessions, the coach is monitoring the leader's behavior in different situations in order to discuss their particularities and consequences during the following sessions. Additional follow-up sessions have been conducted for several managers, by their request.

- The seventh session: re-discussing the assumed objectives and the action plan settled during the first session. The significant behaviors have been pointed out and discussed with regard to these objectives. Moreover, the plan has also been re-discussed from the point of view of the first sessions and thus, considering the first changes or optimizations that had occurred. Also, homework was given in order to re-define the action plans for the latter coaching session.
- Session eight: discussing the present behaviors slightly optimized according to the objectives (the transformational leadership abilities), the discovered blockages and obstacles, as well as the undertakings to be followed in order to autonomously apply these types of behavior. The

coach continues to monitor the newly developed or changed behaviors and abilities that the leader has gained in the current professional contexts.

- The ninth session: discussing the latter observations of the coach based on monitoring the manager's behavior in work situations, re-discussing the initial behaviors and abilities, the particularities relevant for the starting points of the coaching program, as well as the manager's actions until the present moment, followed by their results. Moreover in this phase there are pointed out the possible obstacles and difficulties in maintaining leadership abilities, as well as the contexts in which they can appear.
- The tenth and the final session: discussing the current situation compared to the initial one and the assumed objectives, clarifying the present work related aspects and needs that are important in order to maintain or reach the desired objectives. Also, ways of giving continuity to the results and sharing them to the team members of the manager have been established after finalizing the coaching.

The manager has elaborated as homework an action plan in this regard, similar to the one settled at the beginning of the coaching program.

Two months after finalizing the program, a follow-up session has taken place during which this action plan has been discussed along with the present behaviors relative to the aimed objectives and the difficulties met both in maintaining the results independently (without the coach's support) and also as a result of the situational challenges and accepting change on an organizational level.

The fourth phase was the last one in the coaching process and consisted in reporting the results and taking some measures in order to ensure that the manager and the organization are willing to engage in a long-term development effort following the coaching program.

III. RESULTS

The descriptive data obtained within our sample of 144 managers is presented in the following sections. The equality conditions have been verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

Table 1. Descriptive data regarding the investigated sample of managers ($N = 119$).

MLQ Scales	Parameters		Most Extreme Differences			Z	p
	M	SD	Absolute	Positive	Negative		
Idealized attributes	3.34	.54	.16	.15	-.16	.92	.36
Idealized Behaviors	3.61	.35	.21	.14	-.21	1.24	.09

MLQ Scales	Parameters		Most Extreme Differences			Z	p
	M	SD	Absolute	Positive	Negative		
Inspirational motivation	3.64	.38	.20	.17	-.20	1.18	.12
Intellectual Stimulation	3.57	.42	.19	.16	-.19	1.11	.17
Individualized Consideration	3.14	.56	.13	.13	-.10	.74	.64
Contingent Reward	3.57	.43	.22	.16	-.22	1.30	.07
Management-by-Exception (Active)	2.99	.89	.15	.13	-.15	.89	.41
Management-by-Exception (Passive)	.94	.53	.20	.20	-.13	1.16	.13
Laissez-faire	.39	.48	.23	.23	-.21	1.35	.05
Extra Effort	3.56	.52	.30	.20	-.30	1.75	.00
Effectiveness	3.52	.41	.18	.16	-.18	1.05	.22
Satisfaction	3.49	.60	.31	.19	-.31	1.78	.00

Part of the results obtained by applying the questionnaire for identifying the leadership style is not parametrically distributed (see Table 2.). We will take this aspect into account in the context of the following statistical computations.

Following the coaching program, differences have been evaluated regarding the improvement of the adopted leadership style. As mentioned, the pre and post MLQ answer rate equaled 83% of the total of 41 managers who have finalized the coaching sessions without changing the workplace,

Table 2. Values obtained by managers after applying the leadership style questionnaire pre and post coaching (t2) – Dependent samples T test ($N_{total} = 34$).

	MLQ Scales	M	SD	t	p	dz
1	Idealized attributes	3.33	.54	-4.14	< .01	.75
	Idealized attributes t2	3.86	.80			
2	Idealized Behaviors	3.61	.35	-2.69	< .01	.47
	Idealized Behaviors t2	4.00	.93			
3	Inspirational Motivation	3.63	.38	-3.83	< .01	.62
	Inspirational Motivation t2	4.13	.92			
4	Intellectual Stimulation	3.57	.42	-1.10	= .09	-
	Intellectual Stimulation t2	3.69	.91			
5	Individualized Consideration	3.13	.56	-4.79	< .01	.72
	Individualized Consideration t2	3.75	.98			
6	Contingent Reward	3.56	.43	-4.84	< .01	.78

	MLQ Scales	M	SD	t	p	dz
	Contingent Reward t2	4.16	.88			
7	Management-by-Exception Active	2.99	.88	-3.77	< .01	.56
	Management-by-Exception Active t2	3.54	1.06			
8	Management-by-Exception Passive	.94	.52	-0.51	= .13	-
	Management-by-Exception Passive t2	.95	.88			
9	Laissez-faire	.75	.98	-2.28	= .03	.43
	Laissez-faire t2	.38	.44			
10	Extra Effort	3.51	.52	-0.61	= .15	-
	Extra Effort t2	3.59	.84			
11	Effectiveness	3,52	.41	-0.21	= .24	-
	Effectiveness t2	3.61	.92			
12	Leadership Satisfaction	3.06	.59	-3.40	< .01	.49
	Leadership Satisfaction t2	3.48	.99			

Considering that the means obtained on the MLQ scales do not strictly follow the variable equality condition (as shown in Table 1.), we continue by verifying the differences within the coaching group between the two moments (pre and post coaching) using the Wilcoxon test for two paired samples (see the following table), which is suitable for such situations (Popa, 2008). Both parametric and non-parametric analyses have confirmed a significant improvement of the leadership abilities following the coaching sessions.

Table 3. Values obtained by managers at the leadership style questionnaire (MLQ) pre and post coaching - the Wilcoxon test for two paired samples ($N_{total} = 34$).

MLQ Scales		N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Idealized attributes	Negative ranks	11	9.23	101.50	-3.35	.00
	Positive ranks	23	21.46	493.50		
	Ties	0				
Idealized Behaviors	Negative ranks	13	10.65	138.50	-2.35	.01
	Positive ranks	19	20.50	389.50		
	Ties	2				
Inspirational Motivation	Negative ranks	10	8.35	83.50	-3.22	.00
	Positive ranks	21	19.64	412.50		
	Ties	3				
Intellectual Stimulation	Negative ranks	14	11.17	100.50	-1.37	.12

MLQ Scales		<i>N</i>	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Individualized Consideration	Positive ranks	16	19.78	494.50	-3.72	.00
	Ties	4				
	Negative ranks	8	8.13	65.00		
Contingent Reward	Positive ranks	24	19.29	463.00	-3.81	.00
	Ties	2				
	Negative ranks	7	9.64	67.50		
Management-by- Exception (Active)	Positive ranks	26	18.98	493.50	-1.45	.14
	Ties	1				
	Negative ranks	17	9.95	109.50		
Management-by- Exception (Passive)	Positive ranks	16	21.11	485.50	-1.07	.30
	Ties	1				
	Negative ranks	16	11.63	46.50		
Laissez-faire	Positive ranks	16	17.20	481.50	-1.44	.14
	Ties	2				
	Negative ranks	16	12.47	199.50		
Extra Effort	Positive ranks	17	21.26	361.50	-1.33	.20
	Ties	1				
	Negative ranks	14	9.40	94.00		
Effectiveness	Positive ranks	16	20.30	467.00	1.07	.31
	Ties	4				
	Negative ranks	15	11.38	136.50		
Satisfaction	Positive ranks	14	20.21	424.50	-2,84	.00
	Ties	5				
	Negative ranks	22	18.91	416.00		
	Positive ranks	10	11.20	112.00		
	Ties	2				

The coaching sessions had the anticipated effect on the managers' abilities (see Table 2. and Table 3.). For both types of statistical tests we take into account the results with an error probability lower than 5%. Thus, following the coaching sessions, the managers have obtained higher values at the transformational and transnational leadership scales compared with the initial phase. In other words, the managers who have participated to the coaching sessions see themselves as being more thorough, with higher influence on the people around (the Idealized Behavior MLQ scale), having the power to stimulate teamwork by blasting trust to the ones they

work with (the Inspirational Motivation MLQ scale). Also, following the coaching sessions, managers see themselves as more capable of helping their subordinates develop (the Consideration MLQ scale) and assume their responsibility for the performance objectives, clarifying their expectations to others and recognizing the credits to the ones who reach their objectives (the Contingent Reward MLQ scale).

In order to identify the presence of a potential mediating variable which could modify behaviors associated with the effective leadership, we have evaluated the changes regarding the leadership behavior of the managers who have not participated to the coaching sessions, namely the control group.

The managers in the control group, namely the ones who have not participated to the coaching sessions, did not obtain significant differences between the two time sequences: February 2012 vs. April 2013 (for details, see Table 4).

Table 4. Values obtained for the leadership style questionnaire (MLQ) by the managers who did not participate to the coaching sessions: February 2012 – April 2013 ($N_{total} = 68$).

MLQ Scales		<i>N</i>	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Idealized attributes	Negative ranks	30	29.65	889.50	-.51	.60
	Positive ranks	27	28.28	763.50		
	Ties	11				
Idealized Behaviors	Negative ranks	34	27.32	929.00	-1.37	.16
	Positive ranks	21	29.10	611.00		
	Ties	13				
Inspirational Motivation	Negative ranks	30	30.58	917.50	-1.27	.20
	Positive ranks	25	24.90	622.50		
Intellectual Stimulation	Negative ranks	33	26.08	860.50	-.52	.59
	Positive ranks	23	31.98	735.50		
	Ties	12				
Individualized Consideration	Negative ranks	29	28.40	823.50	-.72	.47
	Positive ranks	25	26.46	661.50		
Contingent Reward	Negative ranks	29	28.00	812.00	-.34	.72
	Positive ranks	29	31.00	899.00		
	Ties	10				
Management-by-	Negative ranks	31	26.97	836.00	-.57	.56

MLQ Scales		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	p
Exception (Active)	Positive ranks	24	29.33	704.00		
	Ties	13				
Management-by-Exception (Passive)	Negative ranks	25	27.56	689.00	.00	1.00
	Positive ranks	27	25.52	689.00		
Laissez-faire	Ties	16				
	Negative ranks	21	24.40	512.50	-1.24	.21
	Positive ranks	29	26.29	762.50		
Extra Effort	Ties	18				
	Negative ranks	27	27.20	734.50	-.30	.75
	Positive ranks	28	28.77	805.50		
Effectiveness	Ties	13				
	Negative ranks	26	27.92	726.00	-.60	.54
	Positive ranks	30	29.00	870.00		
Satisfaction	Ties	12				
	Negative ranks	25	31.40	785.00	-.56	.57
	Positive ranks	33	28.06	926.00		
	Ties	10				

Therefore, we can assert that the coaching sessions had a positive effect in re-setting the leadership potential.

In order to confirm the efficiency of the coaching program, the MLQ scores obtained by the managers who participated to the coaching sessions have been compared at the end of the intervention (April 2013) with the ones of the managers who were not included in the training program (the control group). Statistically significant differences have been identified as managers involved in the training have obtained higher results for the transformational and transactional leadership scales (as shown in Table 5.) In order to equalize the participant's sample of subjects, 35 subjects have been randomly extracted out of the control group.

Table 5. Differences of MLQ rank scales for managers who have participated to the coaching sessions compared to the ones who did not participate to these sessions (N = 35 for both groups).

MLQ Scales	Coaching	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	Wilcoxon W	Z	p
Idealized Attributes	No	25.00	825.00	264.0	825.0	-3.85	.00
	Yes	43.46	1521.00				
Idealized Behaviors	No	25.48	841.00	280.0	841.0	-3.77	.00
	Yes	43.72	1574.00				

MLQ Scales	Coaching	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	Wilcoxon W	Z	p
Inspirational Motivation	No	24.98	824.50	263.5	824.5	-3.85	.00
	Yes	43.47	1521.50				
Intellectual Stimulation	No	32.33	1070.00	509.0	1070.0	-1.022	.30
	Yes	37.09	1345.00				
Individualized Consideration	No	25.61	845.00	284.0	845.0	-3.60	.00
	Yes	42.89	1501.00				
Contingent Reward	No	24.02	792.50	231.5	792.5	-4.25	.00
	Yes	44.39	1553.50				
Management-by-Exception (Active)	No	34.70	1141.00	580.0	1141.0	-.16	.87
	Yes	35.61	1273.00				
Management-by-Exception (Passive)	No	35.71	1180.50	569.5	1235.0	-.30	.76
	Yes	34.73	1235.50				
Laissez-faire	No	37.05	1241.00	508.0	1174.0	-1.03	.30
	Yes	32.53	1174.00				
Extra Effort	No	33.45	1116.00	555.0	1116.0	-.47	.63
	Yes	36.86	1299.00				
Effectiveness	No	36.32	1212.50	536.5	1202.5	-.69	.48
	Yes	33.21	1202.50				
Satisfaction	No	33.86	1105.00	544.0	1105.0	-.60	.54
	Yes	36.50	1310.00				

IV. DISCUSSION

The statistical analyses have confirmed a significant improvement of the leadership abilities after the coaching sessions. Thus, following the coaching sessions, the managers have obtained higher values for the transformational and transactional leadership. The managers who participated to the coaching sessions perceived themselves as being more thorough, more influential towards people around, more capable to help their subordinates develop, as well as having enough power to stimulate teamwork and to boost trust among their co-workers.

Moreover, at the end of the coaching period, the managers included in the program were more inclined to take responsibility for achieving performance objectives, by clarifying their expectations to the others and by giving credit to the ones who reach their objectives. Therefore, we may assert that the coaching sessions had a positive effect in re-setting the leadership potential in concordance with the expectations of the company.

The statistically significant differences have confirmed that the managers involved in the coaching program have obtained higher results on the transformational and transactional leadership scales.

In conclusion, the statistical data confirmed the validity and the efficiency of the coaching program as a mean to obtain favorable changes regarding leadership. The effects of

coaching on the level of leadership are associated, as already mentioned in the specialized literature (Zhu, Avolio & Walumbwa, 2009; Wang, Oh, Courtright & Colbert, 2011), with positive consequences regarding work satisfaction of the employees who are part of the transformational leaders' team and, implicitly, with the improvement of the organizational climate and also with the specific results of the professional performance.

Therefore, our results that sustain the efficiency of the proposed coaching program may stand as an argument that enables its application among any organization which seeks to develop its leaders and reach high performance indicators.

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